

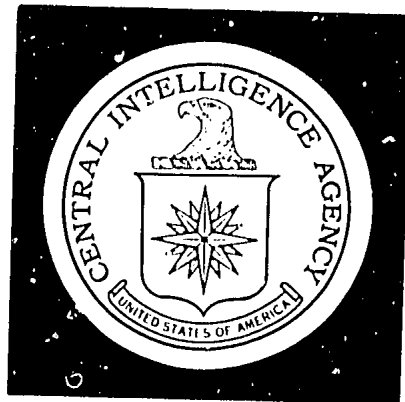
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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

CIA/OCI/2098/71

Intelligence Memorandum

The Situation in Thailand

State Dept. review
completed

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17 November 1971
No. 2098/71



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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
17 November 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Situation in Thailand

(as of 1300 EST)

1. The immediate and probably most important consequence of the changes announced in Bangkok today is the reassertion of full power by the Thai military establishment, particularly the army. Thus far, three "announcements" have been made over Thai domestic radio on behalf of a new "Revolutionary Party" that has seized "administrative power." The announcements are signed by Field Marshal Thanom as "head of the Revolutionary Party."

2. The most significant measures announced are: (1) the 1968 constitution, which established parliament, is annulled, (2) the cabinet has been dismissed, (3) the ministries will be run by the under secretaries with the direct leadership of the Revolutionary Party commander, i.e., Marshal Thanom, (4) there will be no immediate change in military or police commanders, (5) martial law is reimposed.

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3. There has been no public mention of former deputy prime minister Praphat, who has been frequently mentioned as Thanom's future successor and possible political rival.

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their long and amiable association, and the fact that only last month Praphat was urging an increasingly frustrated Thanom to stay in office, it seems more likely that Praphat is working directly with Thanom and will continue to be Thanom's deputy--at least for the immediate future.

4. The chief casualty of the reversion from constitutional to authoritative rule will be the parliament, which presumably will now either be abolished or "transformed" into a constituent body after the Cambodian model. The military leadership--particularly Praphat--had serious reservations about the viability of constitutional, or what passes for democratic, government in Thailand when a new constitution was promulgated in 1968 after ten years of gestation. Their misgivings have grown as the parliament has tried to cut out a role for itself in a carefully circumscribed political environment. The military leadership's fundamental problem with parliament goes back to the first parliamentary election in 1969, when the leadership's party, the SPT, failed to win a majority of the seats. Placed at an immediate disadvantage, neither Thanom nor Praphat, nor any of their subordinates, was sufficiently adept or practiced in the arts of parliamentary or party politics to fashion a smooth or effective working alliance in the legislature. In these circumstances, the government got what it wanted from parliament only with difficulty, a situation that proved exasperating and painful for men whose threshold of patience with democratic practices was already low.

5. It is not yet clear whether it was the accumulated effect of their frustrations that prompted the recent steps or some other development that brought the situation to a head. It may be simply that the army and Praphat, who have been increasingly vocal about their unhappiness with parliament, finally prevailed on Thanom to abolish the constitution. Ruling Thailand without a parliament will be easier than ruling with it,

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and the leaders have probably concluded--with good reason--that the parliamentarians, newspapermen, students, and other "progressive" elements in Bangkok could be kept in line with a minimum of difficulty.

6. The decision to rule via the Revolutionary Party--a symbolic throwback to the Sarit coup of 1957 that was fashioned under the auspices of a "Revolutionary Party"--comes at a time when there has been another flurry of restiveness by "young turks" within the military establishment itself. Thanom and Praphat may have felt that one way to propitiate the agitation from below, and give a sense of decisiveness and direction that has been absent at the top, would be to abolish the constitution and the parliament. This will almost certainly be a popular move up and down the military establishment. The action against parliament will not, however, satisfy another, and perhaps more important, complaint of the younger officers--that the top leaders have stayed in power too long and are not moving aside when their time for retirement comes. Ironically, the abolishment of the constitution also means that there will be no elections in early 1973, at which time Thanom had pledged to step aside.

7. The changes in Bangkok do not appear to be a direct consequence of arguments over substantive policies, either domestic or foreign. Marshal Thanom has told Ambassador Unger that there will be no change in Thailand's foreign policy or in its commitments. There is no evidence that issues of direct interest to the US [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] or the future of US bases, played either a direct role or served as important ingredients in the political mix that led to the recent changes. Nonetheless, the question of Thailand's future relationship with Communist China has been a hot public issue in Bangkok and the government has been under considerable fire over what some regard as its delinquency in not moving fast enough toward a rapprochement with Peking. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Under the new set-up the leaders will be freer to follow their own instincts. That should mean that Thailand will continue to take a very conservative line with respect to better relations with Peking. One test of where things stand on the China issue will be the fate of Foreign Minister Thanat. As things now stand, Thanat, who has been the leading proponent of better relations with Peking, like the other ministers, is out of a job, but it remains to be seen whether he is left completely out of the picture.

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8. The chances are very good that the government will bring off the changes with a minimum of difficulty. Military and police units have been placed on alert but it seems unlikely that there are now any troop commanders who will challenge the leadership, particularly since the immediate targets of the government action are civilian elements. There will be considerable grumbling in Bangkok among the civilians, but it should not get out of hand. Some antigovernment demonstrations are possible, but should be easily contained. The larger domestic questions, both in terms of future changes in the military establishment and the proper mix between the military and civilian sides, will need time to sort themselves out.

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